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ATMOSPHERE.

ALL truth comes from negation, and you cannot know anything or any man well unless you first know what it or he is not. And whenever you can give a precise academic definition of an art term the scope and virility of that term drop to the level of the jelly-fish. When the alchemists tried to define life, the nearer they got to it the farther off they were; yet the mystery of death was all too obvious.

Now this same word *atmosphere* is a greatly abused and mauled word; and there is so much cant nowadays in such pregnant words as tone, vibration and mystery that sensitive men, men who mean what they say, are thoroughly wearied by the vulgar repetition of these catch-words—truly has familiarity bred contempt. Now, I take it, the majority of artists and critics are honest and they despise and shun pretentious and ignorant pictures, people and phrases. The glib talker on art has a very thin veneer; atmosphere is not a veneer and it cannot be given to a picture by smearing or scumbling with white or blue or gray. Can doggerel verses be made into poetry like Shelley's by having the printer use the same type?

Atmosphere is, *au fond*, aerial perspective. When a scene is reduced from nature and the effects of interposed air are kept, the work has depth, and depth is atmosphere. Let us rid ourselves of the false notion that a gray or blue picture is, perforce, atmospheric; and scout the idea that a canvas has atmosphere when it suggests the humidity climbing to the nineties, or where dirt and dust, where thick glaze and varnish together obscure what is likely to be mighty poor drawing.

And, more than this, no one style or kind of picture may arrogate to itself the monopoly of atmosphere; ideas may be confused and hazy, misty and mysterious in the artist's or the critic's mind, but no one on this score accuses him of being deep. Why, then, shall the visible, pictorial outcome of haze and confusion receive the high encomium, the noble title of atmosphere?

A profound, a deep mind, a poet's mind can alone give us atmosphere in the true sense, and no petty tricks, no feints of technique are able to force cleverness and dexterity to approach depth of mind and consequent depth in result. The man who has atmosphere in his work has atmosphere in himself: he is an idealist and for this very reason his work is so entirely real. He is a romantic man, not a classical; and with the romanticists, for the first time, the external world "swims into the painter's ken." When you find a man's work possessing atmosphere you will find the man himself frank and open; you will never see evidence of morbid brooding and hysterical forcing of esoteric notes.

It goes without saying that but few artists, a few rare minds, to-day impart that depth, that vibration of interposed air, that true value of local color, and that feeling for distance that, combined, make the one triumphant note—*atmosphere*.

There is a perspective transcending those primitive, staring, converging lines that delight the heart of the Philistine—for whom a tunnel or corridor is the acme of composition—and this perspective pervades the picture with atmosphere; indeed it is an integral part of it.

The noble forms of Claude and his modern prototype Turner are conjured up by the wand of atmosphere; and when their distances recede in the glow that recalls Keats' lines,

"Season of mist and mellow fruitfulness,
Close bosom friend of the maturing sun,"

we know their landscapes are bathed in their peculiar and proper atmosphere and that all things take their rightful place—solid, distinct, discrete and harmonious. These great idealists were not unhealthy dreamers, they were students, observers, note-takers—but they were not of those who think that art is a trade, a degree more difficult than other trades, nor, on the other hand, were they scientists. With a hand stretched in either direction they were—artists.

Robert Louis Stevenson said, "when we come to Scott after Fielding we become suddenly conscious of the background;" and so long as the Turners hang in the heart of London and so long as the Barbizon room endures in the Louvre, the world will be conscious of the "background," and people will know what atmosphere is.

Delightful mystery in a picture is an ineffable charm; alas! that so often it is the mystery of mud! Mystery is atmosphere's handmaiden, but not a bogey mystery to scare children with, not the blackness of nothingness, but it is to "bathe all, even light itself, in a bath of shadow, from which it might emerge more wet and more glimmering; to make these waves of obscurity sweep around the lit surfaces; to vary, to deepen and to thicken the flood, and yet to make obscurity visible and shadow easy to see through." And we think on Rembrandt.

There is an intense pleasure in detecting sentiments that are somewhat obscure; as in music the tender elusiveness of Chopin's melancholy strains appeals to us more than the franker robustness of some other composers; it is his mystery—his atmosphere—that enthralls and fascinates.

In all this the question of *color* seems to defer to value and to perspective. There is a very narrow gamut of color in atmospheric paintings, but this color, while delicate, is full of distinction. Sentiments are communicated almost without material, by what Thoreau calls "in-audible panting" of out-of-doors.

"The Angelus," whose chief merit is atmospheric, is certainly infelicitous in its color; and who can tell whether, having to make a

sacrifice, Millet cared less about the color than the precious quality of atmosphere. Hamerton goes so far as to claim that "monochrome has the advantage of getting completely rid of distracting and impertinent color."

Can a portrait have atmosphere? It can present us the man as we know him; it can give him to us in varying moods—in thought, energy, joy sorrow, content or resignation. It can place him behind and within the frame—(may he never "start from the frame!")—and it can surround him with reflected and reflecting lights and put him in an air that can be breathed and in a light that *ever* was on sea and land. This is the portrait's atmosphere; and the flexible word lends itself as well to the draped and decorated studio as to a breezy upland or stretch of sea.

But a story-telling picture, a performance that starts out to usurp the privilege and function of articulate speech, is devoid of atmosphere *ab initio*. Seldom has the man who paints *genre* the stuff in him to compel atmosphere, the grand air and all that panoply of the moving sky that elevates and sustains a picture. Such painters can sparkle, it is true, and Fortuny, Meissonier and Detaille will ever have friends of their scintillant, bejeweled canvases. But this fame is ephemeral and only the picture with atmosphere will be accorded an eternity. Humor dips deeper in our hearts than wit.

Fortunate landscape! Already the sound of the word evokes distance and air; and the most indifferent observer has the sentiments of space and depth brought before his mental vision. Let him but once find a grain of pure gold and soon he will learn to delve for hidden nuggets; watching every effect of the air on color, marvelling how the cold mist, the trembling haze of heated air distorts and magnifies; enthralled with the shifting moods of direct sunlight through air, now tenuous, now dense, now dry, now saturated with moisture.

What wonder, then, that gray days and the hour before and after the sun's rise and set are ever *les heures magiques*! Then it is that light meets most resistance through the mixture of gases chemistry tells us forms air, then it is that the composite light from the incandescent star we revolve around traversing not thirty, but thirty thirties of miles of that veil which old earth wraps about her, heaps baffling effects of atmosphere, the red-orange of sun and the blue of ether combining in purple shadow.

But peace has her triumphs as well as war, and with the sun high in the heavens and at the most inartistic hour of the day he who *can* has put so vibrant, so hot, so stifling a light in, through and about his torrid canvas that we no longer wonder why all is blue that is not white.

And what of those days that follow the heavy storms of summer when heaping, sullen clouds that can no longer wet the earth, yet seem reluctant to leave the arena whose air is now so pure, so dustless, so dry, that not a detail is spared us in the far-away village and the black-green forests seem to encircle the end of the earth? Troyon could give us all this and never descend to the topographical or panoramic; and so could all the little band near Fontainebleau. What praise was ever so grateful or so refreshing as that proffered Daubigny, when, before one of his pictures, a poor consumptive cried: "Ah! I can breathe better now!"

If the great masters, whether old or new, have atmosphere, do we bring it to the pictures because the whole trend of teaching makes us reverent and indulgent to what has succeeded? Or, have these pictures survived because, and chiefly because, they have the supreme quality of atmosphere? The reason may be both subjective and objective, for a man does not take away from a picture very much more than he brings to it, and, too often, will deny to the clearer vision of others what he himself cannot discern. And when all is said and done we are nearly back to our starting-point where the man of depth, of atmosphere, will look for and will find these high qualities independent of the name that chances to be on the canvas, independent of repute, school, nationality, time, or subject of the picture. Such an one "knows but one art," and for him a good picture must have atmosphere, and a picture with atmosphere must needs be good.

LEIGH HUNT.

"'Artists are a queer lot,' remarked one of them yesterday, as he smoked pensively, in his Chestnut street studio, and gazed dejectedly at a half-finished sketch. 'I can't do any work to-day, just because I dreamed of a red-headed girl last night. That lets me out. I can dream of any other kind of girl and it doesn't affect my work, but if the vision of my dreams had red hair I'm no good the next day. No, it's not superstition. I don't know what it is. All artists have their off days from some cause or other, and some of them have antidotes. I haven't any. I just give up when the red-headed girl crosses the path of my dreams. A friend of mine counteracts the effect of his hoodoo by clothing himself in an outlandish way. I have seen him working in an opera hat, the coat of his dress suit, and a pair of pink pajamas, and doing good work at that. Another friend of mine always eats a lot of raw onions when he has a particularly sentimental subject to handle. But when it comes to me, I just have to give up.'"

—Philadelphia Ex.